

# VALLEY NEWS

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## NHPR: A Public Radio Success Story

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

Spend some time with Betsy Gardella, president and general manager of NHPR, and three things jump out at you -- her customer focus, her strategic vision and her sense of humor.

“Right now the media landscape is changing very, very rapidly,” she told me. “Radio is no longer a push media where we decide what we want to program and you, as the listener, receive it,” she said.

Technology has changed the rules. Listeners actively choose the programming they want because technology gives them the ability to search for content that suits their specific interests, no matter where in the world of radio that takes them.

“They are doing it through podcasting and RSS feeds, through social networks like Gather.com and Myspace.com, so the question we constantly ask ourselves is, how do we ensure that NHPR's content is where people are looking for it?” said Gardella as she describes some of the media technologies that did not even exist when she joined NHPR three years ago.

“It is a real challenge but it is also a tremendously exiting time,” she said.

Gardella and I spent some time together last week in what will, over the next year, become NHPR's new broadcast center in Concord. We spoke in what is clearly a work in progress, an empty 20,000-square-foot space without rooms or walls but with a stunningly beautiful view out all four sides. She led me around the floor and into her “office” and described NHPR's vision as it begins a yearlong celebration of its 25th anniversary that will culminate with a move to the new space.

NHPR is a public radio success story, and Gardella makes sure every visitor understands that.

“In 1983 we had 30,000-35,000 listeners, now we have 150,000,” she said. In 2001, NHPR made a decision to break with its then-hallowed format of news and information during morning and afternoon driving time and classical music in

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between and began to transmit news and current affairs to its listeners all the time.

“Our listeners jumped by 20 percent after the change,” she said, and she credits the station's board for making that tough decision.

“Just as important, our paid membership, which is around 15,000, or 10 percent of the listener base, kept pace with listener growth, and 13 percent of these members are Vermonters.” she said.

So does NHPR compete with VPR? “Not really,” Gardella said. “In fact, we consider each other good friends. Our combined objective is to increase the number of listeners to public radio. It is a case of the rising tide lifting all boats -- the more people that tune in to public radio, the more listeners each of us gains.”

Paid membership is the lifeblood of public radio: It accounts for 90 percent of NHPR's \$4.2 million annual operating budget. The membership is almost equally split between businesses and individuals. I asked Gardella if NHPR will sharpen its business coverage going forward. “Absolutely, we have always covered business stories, and will, with our anniversary expansion plans, dedicate a reporter full-time to business reporting.”

She would like New Hampshire businesses to know that NHPR recognizes that the state is full of entrepreneurs and the station wants to create an on-air environment that embraces and covers a range of business stories.

NHPR intends to capture the foot-loose and technologically savvy listeners by aggressively courting listener opinions and tailoring content to listener preferences.

“We are setting up ‘sounding boards’ all around the state. My program director and I will travel around New Hampshire to meet community leaders and members to solicit their feedback and guidance. The first meeting is scheduled for November ... in Hanover, and announcements will be sent out shortly,” she said. “We want to create a very informal way to build deeper relationships community by community. We want to listen and bring back ideas. We'll hold six to nine sounding boards this year and make it a regular ongoing opportunity for listeners to interact with us.”

Gardella said she hopes Vermont listeners will come to the Hanover meeting because they are an important part of NHPR's strategic plans. “Around 50,000, a third of our listeners, are in the Upper Valley, and of these over 16,000 live in Vermont,” she says.

Technology is ever present in a conversation with this hands-on chief executive who has spent her working career making significant contributions in the nonprofit sector. She speaks with excitement about the conversion of NHPR's entire programming format to digital audio. Not only does digital radio allow greater clarity and ease in production and transmission, but it lets a frequency be split into multiple broadcast channels, a significant benefit because of the crowded airwaves. This opens up even more possibilities for radio stations.

“We could create multiple programming streams out of one frequency,” she said. And how does one listen to digital transmissions? “You would need to buy a digital radio. They are of very high quality and continue to drop in price,” she said.

Then, after a pause and with an infectious smile, she added, “Or you could buy a BMW, which has digital radio as standard equipment.”

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